

***Circumventing Censorship:  
Virilizing Victorian Homoeroticism after Labouchère***

**Fae Brauer**

**University of East London Centre for Cultural Studies Research**

*This paper shall be accompanied by images signified by • black dots*

When Frederic Leighton exhibited •*Athlete Wrestling with a Python* at the Royal Academy in 1877, it was showered with praise. Followed by •Hamo Thornycroft's *Teucer*, •*The Mower* and Alfred Gilbert's •*Perseus Arming* and •*Icarus*, it launched what •Edmund Gosse called 'the new sculpture'. However, despite protests over their •erotic male nudity and American criticism of *The Teucer* as "too scandalous" for wholesome viewers, this 'new sculpture' escaped censure from Lord Campbell's 1857 Obscene Publications Act. Differentiated from pornography as high art, classically edifying and morally uplifting, illustrations of these sculptures were reproduced regularly in British magazines with postcards of them circulating freely. Just as widely reproduced and circulated, without censure, were photographs of the bodybuilder, •Eugen Sandow, •posed naked like the sculpture of Classical Greece and performing comparable feats of masculine strength. Yet with the •Labouchère addition to the Criminal Law Amendment Act in 1885, the demarcation between art and obscenity was no longer so clearly drawn. Provoked by the •*Report of the Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution* following William Stead's reports of rising male prostitution, this Act not only criminalized "any act of gross indecency with another male person"; it also included a Clause permitting the prosecution of anyone who was "party to the commission of gross indecency amongst male persons". This •"conspiracy charge", as John Addington Symonds called it, ushered in a climate of homophobic censure. Nevertheless, when prosecution of obscenity peaked alongside arrests for gross indecency, it was not •Sandow who was prosecuted, let alone any of the Royal Academy's 'new sculptors', but •Oscar

Wilde. By focusing upon the virilization of the nude male body by Sandow and 'the new sculptors' before, during and after the Wilde Trials, this paper will explore how they confounded the censors with multifarious signs straddling the nexus between permissive manly virility and perverse homosexuality, edifying high art and arousing homoeroticism.

While Wilde achieved notoriety as a poseur, "Sandow" was pronounced "*without peer as a poseur*".<sup>1</sup> While Wilde posed fully fashioned as an aesthete, from the time Sandow performed for Florence Ziegfeld, he posed with no body concealing fashioning save for a carefully planted fig leaf or skimpy silk briefs that managed to reveal far more than they concealed. After plush red velvet curtains parted, coloured lights would gradually illuminate Sandow standing still as a statue on his personalized plinth. Once an orchestra played, he would ripple four hundred of his chalk-dusted muscles in time to the music before performing dazzling feats of strength that built to his climax: Carrying an elephant and piano on his chest and the entire company on his back. Unimpressed, George Bernard Shaw quipped: "*I never wanted to stand my piano on my chest*". "*Nor did I consider it the proper place for ... elephants*."<sup>2</sup> Yet "*Wherever he went mobs paid ... to see [him]*", Jim Elledge surmizes, "*and after the mobs had looked their fill there were private séances*".<sup>3</sup> Both Wilde and Sandow also pursued the same commercial activity of posing for the camera and promoting their photographically fashioned body. Yet while Wilde's body was concealed, Sandow's was invariably revealed.<sup>4</sup>

After beating Samson in London in 1889, Sandow commissioned Henry Van der Weyde's photography studio in Regent Street to photograph him posing as the new king of strongmen with nothing to impede the gaze upon his musculature bared in virilizing poses. In New York, Napoléon Sarony photographed him from the rear and side on. Ten years earlier when Napoléon Sarony had photographed Wilde, he had furnished a very different exposure. As distinct from the softness, looseness, pensiveness and sensory aesthetism connoted by Sarony's staging of Wilde's fully-dressed body, Sandow's body seems to have been posed to embody tautness,

tightness, erectness, firmness, self-control, vigour and virility. While Sarony seems to have staged Wilde as the effeminate aesthete 'man of letters', his staging of Sandow appears to have been as the new 'man of action'. •Yet by no means was it void of eroticism, particularly homoeroticism, as is signified by the centralization of Sandow's erogenous zones and the play of light and shadow upon them – the unusually large fig-leaf specially cultivated by Sarony tantalizingly hinting at the length, volume and inflexion of the concealed genitals.

•In Benjamin J. Falk's New York studios emerged another array of 'Antique' staging. Posed as *The Dying Gaul*, Sandow's bared supine body together with his parted-lips, languorous expression and languid pose with legs ajar conjures up other connotations closer to the sensual and homoerotic vulnerability in 'the new sculpture', epitomized by •Leighton's *Sluggard (Athlete Awakening)* and •Sir Alfred Gilbert's *Comedy and Tragedy 'Sic Vita'* sculpted four years earlier and well known through copious reproductions. Lest Sandow be regarded as innocent of these homoerotic significations, his homosexuality was a well-known public secret having sustained a long living relationship with his self-proclaimed "*bosom friend*", the •composer, Martinus Sieveking. Their daily ritual of sharing a piano stool entailed Sieveking playing bare to the waist, while a nude Sandow worked his muscles. "[Sandow] is fond of the music", reported *New York World*, "and Sieveking likes to see Sandow's muscles work. Both enjoy themselves and neither loses any time."<sup>5</sup>

While these hand-size, card-back cabinet photos had a growing market amongst "young ladies", the largest mail-order distribution was to homosexuals in London where there was a growing subcultural network including •Lord Alfred Douglas, •Edmund Gosse, and John Addington Symonds. These photographs included such 'New Sculpture' as •Leighton's *Athlete*, as well as •Thornycroft's *Teucer*, and •Warrior Bearing a Wounded Youth, "the delight of my eyes & soul", confessed Symonds. At the same time when Gosse first spied •Van der Weyde's, •Benjamin Falk's and •George Steckel's photographs of Sandow in a London shop, in his words "in a beautiful set of poses showing the young strongman clad only in a fig-leaf", Gosse had

immediately grabbed them. So enthralled was Gosse that he attended most of Sandow's performances at the Alhambra and reported sneaking the photos into the "tedious" memorial ceremonies for Robert Browning at Westminster Abbey before disseminating them far and wide. When Symonds received them in Switzerland, he gleefully wrote to Gosse, •"I hardly venture to write what I feel about the beauty of this photograph. It not only awakens the imaginative sense. But beats every work of art . . . No sculpture has the immediate appeal to human sympathy which this superb piece of breathing manhood makes". Obsessed with "possessing copies of all the nude studies which have been taken of this hero", and displaying them in the public gymnasium he sponsored, Symonds lamented feeling over-shadowed by the severity of English censorship laws governing pictures that, in his words, "could not fail to be seductive". Nevertheless, when prosecution of obscenity peaked alongside arrests for gross indecency, it was not Sandow who was prosecuted, let alone any of the Royal Academy's 'new sculptors'. •"It was the extravagantly clothed body of the aesthete, rather than ideal male nudity", as Michael Hatt surmizes, "that raised questions of homosexuality and decadence": Wilde

Despite Wilde being endowed with 'abundant . . . manly strength', according to Montgomery Hyde, without "the slightest suggestion of effeminacy", •he became indelibly inscribed in the language of his trials as its embodiment. With Wilde's purported 'unmanliness' invariably correlated to "the homoerotic", this homoerotic trope of unmanliness was likened by the prosecution to "a dangerous sore which cannot fail in time to corrupt and taint ... all". Even though •the Cleveland Street Trials had already illuminated the network of homosexual sub-cultures across London involving 'rent boys', Members of Parliament and Prince Victor Albert, these 'practices' were deemed to have been most flagrantly flaunted by •Wilde. "*He was one of the high priests of a school which attacks all the wholesome, manly, simple ideals of English life, and sets up false gods of decadent culture and intellectual debauchery*", declared the *Evening News*.<sup>6</sup> "*To him and such as him we owe the spread of moral degeneration amongst young men*".<sup>7</sup> •Immediately

Wilde's productions were halted, his name was removed from *The Importance of being Ernest* programme, theatre hoardings and advertising while the box office collapsed. •With all hopes for revisions to the Labouchère Amendment crushed, the Wilde trials followed by his imprisonment ushered in a spate of suppressions that Jeffrey Weeks aptly calls a "state of homophobic panic".<sup>35</sup>

By repressing homosexual 'inversion' and by eradicating any trace of effeminacy, this censorship was designed to protect the health and morality of the British public body. Reinforced by the Darwinian fitness imperative. It was designed to impel the pursuit of 'imperial manliness' through modern sport for expansion of the Empire into the Imperial Federation of British colonies. This was to be achieved through the attainment of muscularized manhood – initiated by Thomas Arnold's 'muscularized Christianity' and Rugby – and most of all by virility. Within the national British psychopathology of waning masculinity and increasing effeminacy, seemingly embodied by photographs of Wilde, virility became a key criterion and a strategic bioculture.

No longer were articles on •Wilde or Gilbert, Leighton or Thornycroft published in *The Art Journal*. •After a mob attacked the editorial offices of *The Yellow Book* for their publication of poetry by Gosse and Symonds alongside illustrations of art by Gilbert, Leighton and Thornycroft, Audrey Beardsley was instantly dismissed. •*The Studio* proved no exception. After reproducing Leighton's male nude maquettes in clay and *Athlete Wrestling a Python*, plus an article on how homosexual trafficking in Piccadilly followed •the direction of Eros' arrow in Gilbert's Shaftesbury Memorial, Joseph Gleeson White was forced to resign. With shop window prints of the nude male body created by Leighton and Thornycroft branded as 'unfit for public consumption', this led to resourceful and strategic reframing of Aestheticist artwork which uncannily included •Sandow. Rarely posing for professional photographers, let alone flaunting his bare credentials on or off-stage, the respectably married, booted and suited Sandow proved just as strategic.

Aligning the objectives of his physical culture with the mission of National Efficiency, Sandow pursued a three-way didactic strategy. •Incepting his own Institutes of Physical Culture, Sandow manufactured and marketed the equipment deployed at them for •‘a Whole Family’, •commercially boosted by the patronage of Edward VII. With a team of ghost-writers, •he published his own magazine from 1898, *Physical Culture*, renamed a year later as *Sandow’s Magazine of Physical Culture*. In response to the quest for National Efficiency, in 1901 it was retitled as •*Sandow’s Magazine of Physical Culture and British Sport* – renamed in 1903 as *Sandow’s Magazine of Physical Culture, British Sport and Fiction*, not only to signal its relationship to British sport but also to British art and what Sandow called its “physical beauty” epitomized by Leighton’s sculpture and painting.<sup>8</sup> Propelled by these mutually reinforcing strategies and •Sandow’s well-publicized mission of ‘Growing Soldiers without Conscription’, promoted in his magazine opposite *The Pugilist*, immediately his Magazines and Institutes proved successful.

Since these were •publications and places for unabashed displays of male nakedness, as well as male-to-male touching, body to body, skin-to-skin, Sandow’s Institutes appeared able to fulfil the National Efficiency imperative of muscularized and virilized manliness while providing licit new rituals for intense homosocial interaction. Promoting these rituals as patriotic missions in his magazine, •significantly calling his bodybuilding posing competition, •*Our Empire and Muscle*, Sandow was able to provide a legitimate publishing outlet for the imaging of •naked males, albeit virilized •manly ones, for the gratification of the censor and the queered gaze. •Additionally, the homoerotic pleasures afforded by Aestheticist sculpture in *The Yellow Book* and *The Studio* were not denied Sandow’s subscribers. •Despite the association of Leighton’s and Thornycroft’s *New Sculpture* with ‘Green Carnation’ culture, their sculptures were fully exposed in *Sandow’s Magazine of Physical Culture*.

For the first issue of *Sandow’s Magazine of Physical Culture*, Leighton’s life-size version of *An Athlete Wrestling with a Python* was photographed from an angle in which, in the inimitable words of Benedict Read, “the writhing

python conceals what nature and Leighton would not": The penis and scrotum of the naked athlete in sensuous contact with the python. Juxtaposed with Sandow's article on '*The Theory of Weightlifting*' in which Sandow evaluated the superiority of 'the straight press' over 'the bent press', the pressure exerted upon the python by Leighton's *Athlete* with his straightened right arm and tightly flexed hand seemed to corroborate Sandow's argument. Yet without any specific introjection in the text, Sandow's reproduction of Leighton's naked athlete's body remained open to queered projections.

For his next issue and article on '*The Theory of Weightlifting*' subtitled '*The Straight Press*', Sandow chose to reproduce Thornycroft's *Teucer*, rather than such testaments to imperial masculinity as Thornycroft's *Monument to General Gordon*. His photograph seems to complement Sandow's discourse upon the severe strain imposed on a few muscles by 'the one-armed straight press'. Yet as with his photograph of Leighton's *Athlete*, Sandow made no specific reference to Thornycroft's *Teucer*, leaving it open to his reader's projections. Glistening in bronze and utterly naked save for a modest fig-leaf, Thornycroft's *Teucer* appears comparable to the photograph of Sandow's upright body taken by Van der Weyde. Nevertheless, Sandow's readers and beholders may well have been aware of what lay off camera: The buttocks of *Teucer* flexed as much as those of Sandow. This may be why Thornycroft's sculpture was deemed far too scandalous for publication in *American Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* without a thick, opaque loincloth wrapped around its erotogenic parts: Pelvis, penis, scrotum and buttocks. Nevertheless, the recontextualization of these photographs within Sandow's *Magazine of Physical Culture* mediated a shift in their readings in other ways.

While long associated with Aestheticist homoeroticism, when Leighton's and Thornycroft's sculptures were relocated and reframed in Sandow's *Magazine of Physical Culture* by articles on '*The Theory of Weightlifting*' and '*Empire Muscle*', their sculpture appeared to be virilized and valorized as models of imperial manhood. Yet as their location in Sandow's magazines was not anchored to singular meanings, for Gosse, Symonds and Edward Carpenter they could also embody a virilized homoeroticism. Their virilizing

homoeroticism appeared to be reinforced by the photographs of the near-naked, if not fully naked, bodies of modern sportsmen and bodybuilders whom Sandow and others had trained. Published in every issue as 'our portrait gallery' and *Notes of the Month*, they were strategically interspersed with sculpture acclaimed as 'virile' alongside promotions of Bernarr MacFadden's *The Virile Powers of Superb Manhood*. Conversely in juxtaposing the photographs of his students and methods with this virilizing Antique, Renaissance and Aestheticist sculpture, Sandow claimed his bodybuilders had become as virile as the male body in Greek Classical and Roman sculpture and equivalent to 'living statues' epitomized by the first bodybuilding competition at the V&A.

In becoming interchangeable with the keyword, 'manly', 'virility' signified Imperial manhood, Empire muscle, vigorous fertility, patriotic duty, heroic salvation, self-control and moral constraint. In appearing to embody these qualities, Heathcote Statham declared of Leighton's *Athlete* "it would be difficult perhaps to find a finer specimen of vigorous and muscular manhood". The same superlatives were applied to Sandow's virilized bodybuilders. Promoting the baring of his bodybuilders in his magazines as much as his Institutes as a patriotic strategy for winning the Boer War, achieving the British Imperial Federation and accomplishing National Efficiency, Sandow's multidimensional strategy seemed designed to nullify the homophobic panic reverberating after the Wilde Trials. Marketed as elevating models able to reverse corporeal deterioration and attain 'Empire muscle', Sandow's body culture and 'the New Sculpture' were then able to circulate as multifarious signs straddling the nexus between the aspirational and erogenous, the edifying and homoerotic, the permissive and the perverse and, in so doing, circumvent censorship.<sup>9</sup>



---

<sup>1</sup> John D. Fair, Georgia College of State University, *Sports Library*, Fall 2006, pp. 378-379.

<sup>2</sup> John D. Fair, "George Bernard Shaw and Physical Culture", *Effervescent Adventures with Britannia: Personalities, Politics and Culture in Britain*, ed. Wm. Roger Louis (London and New York: Bloomsbury: 2017), p. 37, referencing Dan H. Laurence, ed. *Bernard Shaw, Collected Letters* (London: 1965) IV, p. 14 : ... Shaw wanted to forget – the body, the essence of the material world. Thus, his aversion to the world's foremost symbol of physical perfection of the time is understandable. "Eugen Sandow wanted to overmuscle me" he told George Viereck in 1926, "but I told him I never wanted to stand my piano on my chest, nor did I consider it the proper place for three elephants. I remained a weakling; but I am alive and Eugen is dead. Let not my example be lost on you, or his fate. The pen is mightier than the dumbbell."

<sup>3</sup> Jim Elledge, "Eugen Sandow's Gift to Gay Men", *Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide*, vol. 18, iss. 4, July/August 2011 (unpaginated).

<sup>4</sup> John D. Fair, "George Bernard Shaw and Physical Culture", *Effervescent Adventures with Britannia: Personalities, Politics and Culture in Britain*, ed. Wm. Roger Louis (London and New York: Bloomsbury: 2017), p. 37, referencing Dan H. Laurence, ed. *Bernard Shaw, Collected Letters* (London: 1965) IV, p. 14 : ... Shaw wanted to forget – the body, the essence of the material world. Thus his aversion to the world's foremost symbol of physical perfection of the time is understandable. "Eugen Sandow wanted to overmuscle me" he told George Viereck in 1926, "but I told him I never wanted to stand my piano on my chest, nor did I consider it the proper place for three elephants. I remained a weakling; but I am alive and Eugen is dead. Let not my example be lost on you, or his fate. The pen is mightier than the dumbbell."

<sup>5</sup> *New York World* (June 20, 1893), Adam, *ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>6</sup> 'To him and such as him we owe the spread of moral degeneration amongst young men'.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> C. Lang Neil, "Physical Beauty in Art", *Sandow's Journal of Physical Culture, Sport and Fiction*, July-December 1903, was published with an illustration of Leighton's *The Sea gave up its dead*.

<sup>9</sup> By no means was Sandow alone in his 'resourceful and creative' deployment of this multi-directional strategy able to confound the homophobic panic, as illustrated by the vigorously muscular nude youths cavorting at Newport Beach depicted by Tuke in his 1902 painting, *Ruby, Gold and Malachite*.